

### Pastor Roy's Sermon from January 31, 2016 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)

Children infinity and 0. What is 0. What's the opposite of 0. Time. Love. Learning. Snow storm. Grains of dirt. But not infinite. Everything we can touch has a limit. So how do we think of God as infinity.

Think about these while you hear the Gospel lesson—what is surprising about this passage? What does Jesus do that is unexpected? How is the people's reaction a shock?

Jesus proclaims from Isaiah he is anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim jubilee—God's favor. The people of Nazareth believe that *they* are the poor, that *they* are the captives who will be helped, that *their* blind will receive sight, and that jubilee will free *them* and give *them* a new start because they indeed had difficult lives.

But being his home town, he knows them, and can challenge their faith. He reminds them that they withhold mercy from some. So he holds the Scriptures up to them to teach them about God's mercy for all. In the Scriptures, the Jews were not **always** chosen to receive mercy. Stories from Elijah and Elisha are reminders that all people can have faith and that God does not prefer some over others.

Well, the people of Nazareth are enraged when they feel insulted by this hometown prophet. They don't want to be told about God's mercy for people by whom they feel repulsed or threatened. Gentiles were seen as dangerous, unclean, faithless, and to be avoided, certainly not examples of faith. They were afraid of leprosy, and the needs of widows were overwhelming. They didn't want to jeopardize their own survival.

Suddenly the people of Nazareth are no longer impressed by Jesus' amazing words of wisdom. They become a lynch mob planning to kill him. How quickly their opinion changes. As the story ends, the only miracle they see that day is the miracle of Jesus' escape from their rage.

Are these people a bit touchy? Imagine, that Jesus could so touch a raw nerve that they would take steps to kill him. So why include this story in Luke's account of the Gospel?

Maybe because when we hear the edge of the Gospel, we react too(!), as the people of Nazareth. So, we must sit with this story.

When we get desperate, we also prefer lynch mobs over mercy. Sometimes we like to think of Jesus slapping us on the back like a good politician and assuring us that we *do* need to take care of and protect ourselves and beware of those bad guys over there. We like to be told that we are right, and **they** are wrong. . .and dangerous. . . and not to be trusted—ever.

It gets messy when we start listening to enemies and people we don't trust.

By nature, we forget that God has no preferences. We forget that God loves freely by nature and bestows mercy like the snow, rain, and sun, and the birds that fly about. The divine power of mercy and love does not follow our rules of engagement. We miss out on joy and hope when we build our faith on the foundation of fearful instincts.

But Jesus is reminding us that God's mercy and love will prevail. Every time. This Gospel calls us to watch and participate in Good News to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and overall, that this is the year of the Lord's favor, for all without preference or reservation.

It is hard to imagine the abundance of God. Our minds don't handle infinity very well. We can imagine hundreds of years, even thousands, but who can imagine millions or billions, or trillions? And infinite

mercy, Who can imagine that? Or love that never grows weary? Or who can imagine the infinite life of God. A life which never dies.

So when we talk about resurrection, we are talking about infinite life. Life which goes far beyond that of our own, personal experience. We are talking about being connected, in communion, with all of life as a gift. Mind boggling! This is why we are afraid of death, because we have a hard time imagining how God's gift of infinite life might personally connect with me/with you.

Luke knows that the infinite grace of God will always be a challenge to the church. We will always have our preferences, our favorites, our own ideas about who is ok and who is not ok. We will always be tempted to believe that there are those who are beyond the grace of God. Criminals. People of other races and cultures. Muslims. Terrorists. Those who physically and sexually abuse children. Or even those who are addicted.

The epiphany of the gospel is that we are called to love and serve freely, based on God's abundance. I believe that is why our Nazareth warning is paired with Paul's chapter on the mighty power of love for every relationship. That love will always prevail. Always.

It is not easy to love. The Good News is that we are called to keep trying. To keep going in the direction of love. To be patient, to be kind, not envious, not insisting on our own way, rejoicing in truth, bearing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things, in the dance of love. In wisely exercising love in all our relationships. Not beating ourselves up or allowing someone else to abuse us, but struggling to the edge for mercy's sake. May the Spirit empower us to live in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.